

**THE IS ACADEMIC-PRACTITIONER DISCONNECT:  
EXPLORING THE PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVE THROUGH  
ACTION RESEARCH**

By

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## STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

I certify that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the thesis. To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the thesis, nor does it contain any material that infringes copyright.

As part of the evolution of this research project, I published a number of papers. These papers were co-authored by my then supervisor, Mark Toleman. My role in all of these papers was that of primary author. I was fully responsible for the initiation, design and conduct of all aspects of the research.

- 2004 'Crossing the Great Divide: a first step toward bridging the gap between Academia and Industry', in *Proceedings of 15th Australasian Conference on Information Systems (ACIS)*, Hobart, Australia.
- 2005 'Building the bridge between academia and practice', in *Proceedings of 16th Australasian Conference on Information Systems (ACIS)*, Sydney, Australia.
- 2005 'Bridging the Academia-Industry divide: Academics reach out!' *The Software Practitioner*, vol. 15 and 16, no. 6 and 1, pp. 3-7.
- 2005 'Is Evidence-Based Practice a plank in the bridge between academia and practice?' paper presented to 4th International Symposium on Empirical Software Engineering, Noosa Heads, Australia.
- 2006 'The Long March: a Novice Researcher's Journey of Discovery Through the Research Methodological Maze and Haze', paper presented to 5th European Conference on Research Methodology for Business and Management Studies (ECRM), Dublin.
- 2007 'Action Research: A New Exploration of its Two Masters', paper presented to 4th QualIT, Wellington.
- 2007 'Bridging the IS Academic-Practitioner Relationship Divide: a Review, a Theoretical Framework and an Example of Interaction', in *Proceedings of 18th Australasian Conference on Information Systems (ACIS)*, Toowoomba, Australia.

Two other papers less closely related to the topic were co-authored with other researchers. My role in these was that of co-author.

- 2006 Young, R, Darroch, F & Toleman, 'Development of an IS Relevance Index', in *Proceedings of 17th Australasian Conference on Information Systems (ACIS)*, Adelaide, Australia.
- 2009 Recker, J, Young, R, Darroch, F, Marshall, P & McKay, J, 'ACIS 2007 Panel Report: Lack of Relevance in IS Research', *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*, vol. 24, no. 18.



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## ABSTRACT

The Information Systems (IS) field has struggled to achieve a functional relationship between academia and practice. Debate has persisted among academics, but without apparent progress. The relationship is characterised as suffering a 'disconnect', largely resulting from a 'communication deficit'. The problem is complex and interrelated with other major academic debates regarding the field's identity.

The applied nature of the field and the importance of practitioners as stakeholders in academic research underline the significance of the academic-practitioner relationship. Prominent academics question the future viability of an IS academic discipline, and warn of an impending crisis. They advocate 'proactive change' by engaging with practitioners, and call for empirical research into the practitioner perspective of the relationship.

There are two primary objectives of this research.

The first is to explore the practitioner perspective on the relationship with IS academia and the role played by academia. The second is to trial, via Action Research (AR), an engagement approach that can be shown effectively to address the disconnect.

The research objectives are achieved via two complementary AR cases.

The first, the 'BA Workshop case', is 'problem-driven', and the research context is heavily influenced by academia. The second, the 'PM Alliance case', is 'researcher-driven', and the research setting is predominantly influenced by its industry location.

For the purposes of this thesis, the theoretical framework is referred to as the Academic-Practitioner Interaction Theoretical Framework (APITF). This framework, which underpins the interaction approaches, is primarily based on Boundary Spanning Theory. It adopts the Dialogical Action Research (Dialogical AR) approach. It also draws on the conception of IS as a 'design science' and the principles of Mode 2 Knowledge.

These cases yielded a variety of qualitative data in the form of transcribed interviews, emails and personal communications, observations, and corporate documentation. The cases were conducted under an interpretivist-pragmatist paradigm, which acknowledges the subjective nature of the research. The data are analysed using thematic analysis methods.

The research provides an in-depth understanding of the practitioners' perspective of academia and the academic role. It also yields insights into the current state of the

relationship, and the causes of the disconnect. Seeking the practitioners' viewpoint in a context of deeply engaged action facilitated a more meaningful response from the practitioners. It also enabled the Author to make more informed observations.

Both cases provide evidence to support the efficacy of the APITF as a basis for conducting academic-practitioner interactions that can overcome the relationship disconnect. While the success of the boundary spanning rôle may seem intuitively obvious, the emphatically positive response from practitioners is noteworthy.

The key features of Dialogical AR are also confirmed as prescribing appropriate roles for both academics and practitioners to interact productively. Overall, the evidence suggests that the boundary spanning role may be the crux of a potential solution. While the concept of academic-practitioner engagement is inherently appealing, such interactions are operationally challenging.

This research makes two main contributions.

Firstly, it provides an in-depth understanding of the practitioner perspective. Secondly it answers the call for pragmatic, action-based responses to the academic-practitioner disconnect, and demonstrates how highly functional relationships between academics and practitioners can be achieved.

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This thesis has been a journey that has tested me in every sense. The following words serve as a warning to those of us who pursue these goals: *'I 'ope you won' do too much figurin', 'cos figurin' 'urts yer 'ead....'* Bert Swannell (Metropolitan Water Board Greaser, Hampton, Middlesex UK, June 1950), on learning that his Grandsons had passed the 11+ examination.

One of those Grandsons, Peter Swannell, went on to be an exemplary academic. It has been my great fortune to have had Peter supervise me throughout my candidature. His intellect, drive and wit are truly inspirational. For his outstanding and unrelenting support I owe him an enormous debt of gratitude.

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